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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the different dialects children bring to the school environment and how U.S. schools deal with these differences. Reference is made to the Ann Arbor (Michigan) case in which a group of African-American parents sued the local school system on behalf of their children, claiming the school was denying their children equal educational opportunity because of their language background, and to the recent Oakland (California) school board decision on instruction of African-American vernacular dialect speakers. The digest discusses the consequences of dialect differences, debates "difference" versus "deficit," and offers guidelines for teaching a standard dialect. The final section describes how dialect study can be beneficial to students from all linguistic backgrounds and suggests that instead of seeing differences as barriers to overcome, they can provide fascinating topics for scientific study. (JL)

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VERNACULAR DIALECTS IN U.S. SCHOOLS

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Digest

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Vernacular Dialects in U.S. Schools

Donna Christian, Center for Applied Linguistics

The Dialect Issue

Children from different backgrounds come to school speaking a wide variety of dialects. Should our schools try to teach all students to use a standard dialect? If so, how? If not, how should different dialects be handled in the school setting? What impact does speaking a non-school dialect have on students' academic success and on their interactions with others in and out of school? These complex and controversial questions have been debated through the years, but they have become increasingly prominent in the last three decades. In particular, the controversy aroused by the December 1996 announcement of the Oakland (CA) School board about its policy on the instruction of African American vernacular dialect speakers underscores the fact that these issues have not been resolved.

One central issue in this controversy is whether mastery and use of a standard dialect should be required in schools. Some people consider such a requirement to be discriminatory, because it places an extra burden on certain students. Others argue that it is a responsibility of the education system to teach a standard dialect to broaden students' skills and opportunities. For instance, students who do not develop facility with standard English may find that their employment or educational potential is restricted. A student's chances for success in school and in later life may be related to mastery of standard English.

Consequences of Dialect Differences

Dialect differences can affect the quality of education received by some students both academically and socially (Labov, 1995). A child's dialect may interfere with the acquisition of information and with various educational skills such as reading. In a court case in Ann Arbor (MI) in 1979, a group of African-American parents sued the local school system on behalf of their children, claiming that students were being denied equal educational opportunity because of their language background (Chambers & Bond, 1983; Farr Whiteman, 1980). Specifically, the parents maintained that the schools were failing to teach their children to read because the language differences represented by their children's vernacular dialect were not taken into account. The parents won their lawsuit, and the schools were ordered to provide special staff training related to dialects and the teaching of reading.

The social consequences of belonging to a different dialect group may be more subtle, but are just as important. The attitudes of teachers, school personnel, and other students can have a tremendous impact on the education process. Often, people who hear a vernacular dialect make erroneous assumptions about the speaker's intelligence, motivation, and even morality. Studies have shown that there can be a self-fulfilling prophecy in teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities (Cazden, 1988). If an educator underestimates a student's ability because of dialect differences, the student will do less well in school, perhaps as a direct result of the negative expectations. In some cases, students are "tracked" with lower achievers or even placed in special education classes because of their vernacular speech patterns.

Difference vs. Deficit

Negative attitudes about speech start with the belief that vernacular dialects are linguistically inferior to standard versions of the language. In fact, the language systems of various groups of speakers may differ, but no one system is inherently better than any other. Research clearly supports the position that variation in language is a natural reflection of cultural and community differences (Labov, 1972).

Despite linguistic equality among dialects, students' language and cultural backgrounds may influence their chances for success. When children from nonmainstream backgrounds enter school, they are confronted with new ways of viewing the world and new ways of behaving. Uses of language, both oral and written, are centrally involved in this new culture (Farr & Daniels, 1986). Heath's (1983) detailed account of language and culture patterns in two rural working class communities demonstrates clearly the conflict between language and cultural practices in the community and in the school. To move toward school expectations, children may have to adapt to language structures and patterns of usage that are different from those they have been using: for example, saying "They don't have any" instead of "They don't have none" in school settings, or learning rules governing when and how to make requests.

Guidelines for Teaching a Standard Dialect

The fact that language differences do not represent linguistic and cognitive deficiencies is an important premise for any education program. Given the advantages that may be associated with the ability to use standard English in appropriate situations, most schools include it as a goal of instruction for all students. Some general guidelines should be followed in teaching standard English at any level (Wolfram & Christian, 1989).

- The teaching of standard English must take into account the importance of the group reference factor. Speakers who want

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to participate in a particular social group will typically learn the language of that group, whereas those with no group reference or with antagonistic feelings toward the group are less likely to do so.

• Instruction in standard English should be coupled with information about the nature of dialect diversity. By giving students information about various dialects, including their own, teachers can demonstrate the integrity of all dialects. This approach clarifies the relationship between standard and vernacular dialects, underscoring the social values associated with each and the practical reasons for learning the standard dialect.

• Teachers and materials developers need a clear understanding of the systematic differences between standard and vernacular dialects in order to help students learn standard English.

• The dialect of spoken standard English that is taught should reflect the language norms of the community. The goal of instruction should be to learn the standard variety of the local community, not some formal dialect of English that is not actually used in the area. Regional standards are particularly relevant in the case of pronunciation features.

• Language instruction should include norms of language use, along with standard English structures. Speaking a standard dialect includes the use of particular conversational styles as well as particular language forms. For example, using standard English in a business telephone conversation does not involve simply using standard grammar and pronunciation. It also involves other conventions, such as asking the caller to "hold" if an interruption is called for, or performing certain closing routines before hanging up.

The teaching of standard English requires careful thought, ranging from underlying educational philosophy to particular teaching strategies, if it is to be carried out effectively and equitably.

Dialect Diversity: Opportunity, Not Liability

The active study of dialects can benefit students from all linguistic backgrounds by helping them gain a better understanding of how language works (Adger, 1997; Wolfram, Christian, & Adger, in press). At one level, dialect differences may be treated as an interesting topic within language arts study. For example, a unit on vocabulary differences from different parts of the country can be both fun and instructive. (Where do they say "soda" vs. "pop"? Or "bag" vs. "sack" vs. "poke"?) When treated more comprehensively, dialect study can provide the opportunity for students to do empirical research and to develop critical thinking skills: observation, comparison, argumentation. Every school has nearby communities that are linguistically interesting, both in themselves and in how they compare with other communities. Students can examine their own speech patterns and gather language samples from other residents in the area. Such investigations can have the added advantages of enhancing self-awareness and the understanding of cultural diversity (Erickson, 1997). Further, sending students into the community can contribute to preservation of the cultural and oral traditions of the region. The exploration of varieties of English can also help students gain insight into differences between spoken and written language, as well as variations related to formality, genre, and special registers.

The concept of using dialect diversity and the cultural diversity that accompanies it as a resource in the curriculum presents a viewpoint that is very different from many traditional approaches. Instead of seeing differences as barriers to be overcome, the differences provide fascinating topics for scientific study.

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